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ORAL COMPOSITION IN ITS RELATION TO WRITTEN¹

JOSEPH M. THOMAS
University of Minnesota

For the last twenty-five years the theory has held sway that the proper way to teach students to write is by giving them constant practice in composition. As a sort of corollary to this proposition it was assumed that whoever could write with reasonable accuracy and skill would be able also to speak equally well. Therefore theme-writing on the part of students and theme-correcting by the teachers has assumed an important place in the field of English both in secondary schools and in colleges. From the beginning, however, this practice and the theory underlying it have been subjected to constant criticism. The practice has been attacked by those who held to the older idea that familiarity with good books and constant study of the masters of literature constituted the only approach to the art of writing, and that special training in composition was not only unnecessary, but in so far as it distracted attention from the really important work was in a measure abortive. Further, it has been seriously questioned by those who reluctantly assented to theme-writing in theory whether the great expenditure of time and energy which it involved could be justified by the results.

The only effective reaction, however, against this extensive training in written composition has come from another source.

¹ A paper read before the Conference on English at Stratford-on-Avon, Aug. 1 to 8, 1914.

No one who has not been engaged in the teaching of composition can realize the great demands it makes upon a teacher's time and the even greater demands upon his vitality and his enthusiasm. For years our teachers of English have been endeavoring to bring the governing bodies of schools and colleges to a realization of the facts so that they might be relieved of a portion of the burden they have assumed. But authorities are ever slow to realize the necessity for change when increased expenditure is involved. And so, it must be confessed, these efforts have been almost wholly in vain. The teachers have been compelled to find their own way out of the difficulty. They were confronted with the necessity of giving up a part of what they regarded as really inadequate training in composition or of devising some method whereby it could be carried on with less labor. For the past ten years, nearly every conference of teachers of English in the United States has been presented with some device, generally by someone not engaged in teaching composition, whereby the reading of themes could be done without effort.

It was this situation which led to the widespread interest during the last few years in the subject of oral composition. It must be said, however, that it was not originally advocated merely as a means of reducing the labor of the teacher, but was put forward by a number of men to meet what they considered to be a serious defect of our training in English. The theory that one who was taught to write well would also be able to speak not only correctly but easily has not been substantiated by experience. It is not uncommon to find that students who write with ease and even with an approach to literary excellence speak with the greatest effort and with incoherence before their own classmates. Many men who have achieved no slight distinction as writers are notoriously poor speakers. The late Professor James, whose fascinating works in psychology and philosophy are doubtless known to most of you, confessed that he did not dare trust himself to deliver the simplest address without reliance upon carefully prepared notes.

It must be generally admitted that one of the most important functions of any democratic system of education is to train students

to express themselves intelligibly and effectively. The average individual is called upon to talk to his fellows, wholly apart from the desultory conversation of everyday life, ten times to every occasion that he has the impulse to write. Those who criticize our exclusive devotion to training in writing and the consequent neglect of training in speaking have good ground on which to stand. Valuable as I regard theme-writing to be, I must confess that it has produced no considerable by-product in the form of exactness or facility of speech.

In making this admission, I do not wish to be understood as criticizing the present practice of giving students constant training in writing. This alone, however, is not adequate to accomplish what the students themselves have a right to demand. If I were called upon to defend theme-writing, I should minimize those points so often emphasized whenever the subject is discussed. Ability to spell, to punctuate, to paragraph properly, to use words with propriety and accuracy is no slight accomplishment. But after all, these are only means to an end. Any teacher who considers training in these to be his principal function is likely to find his work rather a dreary burden and to become an uninspired and uninspiring drudge. *Theme-writing in its more important aspect aims primarily to develop imagination, accurate observation, and logical, coherent thinking.* Without these there can be no writing or speech worthy of serious attention. When one considers written composition from this point of view, he realizes how important it is as a preparation for effective speaking. Whatever place is given to oral composition, it must not be at too great a sacrifice of the more fundamental training in writing.

Oral composition as supplementary, or rather complementary, to written composition can be justified on more theoretical grounds. No student of style is likely to assent to the doctrine that "one should write as he speaks," and it is rather obvious that a bookish style is ineffective in speaking. Speech and writing in so far as style is concerned have different ideals. When one considers further the demands made upon the speaker in the matter of delivery which concerns the writer not at all, the need of special training in speaking becomes manifest.

Oral composition, regarded merely as supplementing the deficiencies of theme-writing, offers many advantages, the chief of which lies in the fact that the speaker is always addressing a real audience. All prose discourse must be considered to be communicative. As such it presupposes some reader or body of readers. The chief difficulty in securing satisfactory results from theme-writing springs from the fact that it is largely exercise work—that is, only make-believe communication. Unless the teacher in assigning a theme is careful to state the conditions under which it is to be written and to specify a body of readers to whom it is to be addressed, the students are likely to find difficulty in conceiving any audience. Unless the teacher sets up a target for them, they are prone to fire their shots at random into the air, hoping in a vague way to hit something. The fact that so many of their themes never receive publication in any form, not even being read before their classmates, causes students to write them with their ultimate destination in mind. The result is that they are written for and addressed to the waste-paper basket. In these cases we have what might be described as communication between intellectual equals.

Even when the student is able to hold clearly before him an imaginative audience and to address himself to it, he labors under the disadvantage of not being able to measure the effectiveness of his work by their response. The only criterion he has is the criticism of his teacher, who is an imaginary intermediary between writer and reader. We may leave out of consideration those cases in which the student for want of any other real reader addresses himself to the teacher, because in only the most ideal circumstances does the pupil then feel free to express himself honestly and sincerely. The real impulse to authorship is unusual among students: the egotism which prompts authors to write consciously for posterity is fortunately more rare. It must be admitted that theme-writing is for the majority merely an exercise. Your school boy will practice assiduously day after day in order to attain athletic skill. But if he loses his ambition to excel in athletic contests, or is convinced that he will never have an opportunity to test those powers he is attempting to develop, then all his training falls to the plane of those spiritless exercises which people of a sedentary occu-

pation practice before a mirror as a preventive of obesity. The great problem in teaching composition is to keep before the students the illusion of reality.

Oral composition because of its very nature approaches much nearer to the conditions of actual discourse. The pupil is confronted with a real audience of his classmates, and it is they whom he must interest and instruct or entertain. If, like parliamentary speakers, he addresses another and larger audience, he cannot be unaware of the appreciation or flagging interest of his actual auditors. But this fact, to which oral composition owes its advantages over written, also gives rise to its special difficulties. To assist the student in meeting these requires the greatest tact and skill and no small measure of ingenuity on the part of the teacher. I shall take up these problems in the order in which, as it seems to me, they present themselves to the student, and shall suggest certain devices for solving them which various teachers have found successful.

First, partly through embarrassment and partly because of lack of training in that close concentration which speaking demands, the student is unable to hold in mind what he has to say and to present his material in an orderly, coherent manner. Progress in this direction should be along what seems to me to be natural lines of development. In the beginning the student should be not only allowed but encouraged to speak from notes; the more timid might even be permitted to speak from manuscript. I do not see why we should deny to our students the privilege of which we all avail ourselves on occasions such as this. It is no small accomplishment for a teacher when he succeeds in inducing a student to read his own work in any intelligible and expressive manner. I have, moreover, little sympathy with the theory that the use of notes tends to become habitual. Notes are at best an awkward device, and the instinctive tendency of any speaker is to free himself from them as speedily as possible. As the stage is approached when notes are to be abandoned, the teacher should hold brief conferences with the students. Talking over with another the main points of any speech, especially if one is called upon to justify his selection, is the most effective way of fixing

them firmly in mind. From speaking without notes to purely impromptu speaking is a natural step. It means simply cutting down the time allowed for special preparation and substituting for it general information on the subject discussed. This sort of oral work should begin with informal argument in which the speakers discuss questions which are of immediate interest to them and about which they have probably been talking with one another. Difference of opinion is one of the strongest provocatives to speech and is likely to rob impromptu speaking of any terrors it may possess even for the most timid. Speaking without special preparation may tend to develop fluency at the expense of accuracy and depth of thought, but it is at least to be commended as a most rigorous exercise in mental concentration.

The second difficulty which confronts the young speaker is the lack of any adequate and effective vocabulary. It is strange that in the studies which have been made of the extent of the vocabularies of various classes of people, one fundamental fact has generally been ignored. There is a striking analogy between our relations to words and our relations to our fellow human beings. There are a great many people whom we recognize at sight, but whose names we may not even know; there is a smaller group of those whom we call acquaintances, and the still more limited circle of our real friends and intimates. Similarly there is our reading vocabulary, including all those words which we recognize but which we have never made our own. There is, next, the more limited group of words which we know well enough to make use of in writing when we have time to hunt about for the exact expression. Lastly, there is that small group of intimate words and phrases which we employ almost unconsciously in speaking. With the majority of people the number of friendly words is extremely limited. They move mentally as well as physically in very circumscribed areas. This is true in an exaggerated form of the school boys and girls with whom we have to deal. The condition is further aggravated by the fact that the major portion of their everyday speech is made up of a special school jargon and of the latest slang. We are all aware of these facts; we constantly deplore them; but we are brought face to face with them in their most

startling and most depressing form when we first call upon our pupils for any connected serious speech. The encouraging factor of the situation is that the students are as conscious as we of their defects. It may be laid down as a general rule that a speaker is more conscious of the inadequacy and inelasticity of his vocabulary than his audience ever is.

Eight years ago when I first attempted to teach oral composition in connection with certain courses in theme-writing, I made an experiment which resulted so disastrously that I have never repeated it. Without the knowledge of the students, I had an expert shorthand writer take down their speeches exactly as they were delivered, with all the repetitions—the “oh’s” and “ah’s” and “and so’s” and all other crutches of a halting delivery. These were typewritten and placed in the students’ hands. My intention was to shock them into a sense of their defects. The result was simply unnecessary discouragement. One student expressed his indignation thus: “We all know well enough what poor speakers we are without having before us this tangible evidence of our shame.”

It is proper in written composition to criticize a student harshly for a slovenly use of words, because dictionaries, books of synonyms, and other aids are at his command, and all that is needed is a little effort on his part. We all know of how little avail immediate effort is in speaking. The growth of a vocabulary here does not respond to forcing methods. The reason students have so limited a speaking vocabulary is that they have felt no demand for anything more. The law of supply and demand is operative: the spoken vocabulary tends to become adequate to the requirements made upon it by drawing upon those words with which one becomes familiar through writing and reading. One of the most effective means of increasing one’s vocabulary for all practical purposes, and especially of bridging the gap between the reading vocabulary and that of speech, is the habit of committing to memory passages not only of poetry but also of prose. It cannot be commended too highly for its general educative value nor for the inestimable pleasure it gives to those who have been trained to it long after their school days have become only an indistinct memory. But to the writer

and especially to the speaker it furnishes the most practicable answer to the problem of how he is to become master of an expressive diction. In the earlier stages of oral composition at least, what the student needs is encouragement. The teacher should concern himself but little about the English his pupils use. It is sufficient if he calls their attention to the most serious offenses against propriety and good taste. He should be more interested in discovering those transgressions which have become habitual than in finding fault with any individual performance.

The third difficulty to be overcome by the student is that of physical self-consciousness. When he stands before his classmates and knows that their attention is centered upon him, he is painfully aware that he has hands and feet. The result is either the paralytic immobility which increases his own embarrassment or else those awkward gestures and nervous movements which concentrate the attention of the audience upon him instead of upon what he has to say. The ideal of delivery in speaking is that neither posture nor gesture nor movement should attract attention to itself. They should be spontaneous, expressive. This is of course impossible if the speaker is self-conscious. I have little sympathy with the methods of those teachers of public speaking who train their pupils wholly apart from speech in various gestures and bodily movements. Expressive awkwardness is preferable to self-conscious elegance.

The simplest device by which a student may grow accustomed to appearing before an audience without embarrassment is by allowing him, or encouraging him, to use illustrative material. Diagrams or tables of figures on the blackboard, charts, and pictures which illustrate and supplement the speaker's points are of service, not only to his audience but also to him. Teachers in schools which are fortunate enough to own a reflectoscope—an instrument by which an ordinary small photograph may be thrown in enlargement on a screen—will find it a useful ally in the teaching of oral composition.

In a recent number of the *English Journal* there is an interesting account of experiments in oral English by Mrs. L. M. Russell of the Central High School of Chattanooga, Tennessee. She has

made extensive use of the reflectoscope in a most ingenious way. One series of talks by her students dealt with great government enterprises, such as the reclamation of arid land by irrigation or reforestation. The publications of the government and the illustrated weekly and monthly magazines supplied the necessary pictures. Another group of students presented reports on current events, the pictures of which were also supplied by the illustrated papers. Others gave accounts of their visits to great cities, to colleges, or to places of historic interest or scenic beauty, all illustrated with the products of their own cameras or the photographic postcards which the traveler so industriously collects. The climax was reached when students gave accounts of various operas which were illustrated both by pictures through the reflectoscope and by the reproduction of the music by the victrola.

To me the most interesting point of Mrs. Russell's account was her statement that a number of these illustrated "lectures" were so interesting and valuable that they were repeated by request before the whole school and later before school clubs and leagues made up of the parents and friends of the children. It furnished a partial solution of the problem of how to work out in practice a theory I have long held, that the proper way in which to overcome self-consciousness before an audience is to begin with a small group of auditors and then to speak to audiences constantly increasing in size.

This sort of talk also has a further advantage which springs from the nature of the subject. In all these cases I have mentioned, except the accounts of travel, the speaker's rôle is that merely of reporter or expositor. There is little opportunity and practically no demand for an expression of his opinions and views. The shy, the timid may forget themselves in such an impersonal presentation of which they are only the instrument.

There is also to be found in this article by Mrs. Russell a number of suggestions as to how we are to answer that perplexing query of the pupil, "What am I to talk about?" Of course, the *first* great difficulty which confronts the student is that he thinks he has nothing to say. I have chosen to present this only incidentally here because it is not a difficulty peculiar to oral composition. He

is equally bewildered when he is asked to write. It is not true, of course, that he has nothing to say. It is the business of the teacher either by positive assignment of topics or by a suggestive discussion of the various possibilities to enable the student to make a wise selection. In this age of almost miraculous invention, of marvelous engineering achievements, of exploration into every corner of the globe, of feverish social unrest and political change, there is little excuse for adults to confine their conversation to the weather, to their food and clothing, and to the foibles, if not worse, of their neighbors, or for the school boy to be unaware that anything of importance ever occurs except in the domain of sport. In a country such as yours where there is scarcely a spot without its local traditions and historic associations, the young traveler ought not to lack material. He can present if nothing else the interesting fiction of the mendicant and mendacious guides in whom these places abound. There are indeed few persons, young or old, who have not through their daily reading, their travels, or their hobbies or avocations found plenty of material of interest to others. They have not, however, any sense of values, any power of selection: these the teacher must supply until they have been developed through training.

The last problem to concern the young speaker is that of utterance or actual elocution. In fact it has been my experience that he takes little thought of it unless it is forced upon his attention by his audience or the teacher. Even after he becomes aware of the necessity of a distinct and expressive utterance, he is generally unable because of lack of training to achieve it. Students bow early to the tradition that there is something pedantic or plebeian about a distinct articulation and clear enunciation. As one of my pupils said with more candor than tact in answer to my criticism of her speech: "One doesn't want to be taken for a school teacher."

How we are to combat this slovenliness of speech is a serious problem. With all the demands that are now made upon his time, the teacher of English can find little place for any sort of training in the technique of speaking. Personally, I have little confidence in the efficacy of any special training in what are called "the speech arts" until the students come to feel the need of it and to make a

real demand for it. The practice of giving students general exercises in articulation and breath-control is a great deal like setting a child who has no ambition to play the piano at five-finger exercises. Study of the technique of any art can be profitable only to those who have some desire to excel in it and who furthermore appreciate in what manner it is a means to the end they have in view. Fortunately our students are young enough so that whatever bad habits they have formed are reasonably easy of correction. A large part of our difficulty is due to the fact that we have neglected the reading aloud by students of those works which they study in English courses. A constant insistence upon an intelligent and interpretative reading of literature not only is an immeasurable aid in assuring the appreciation of it, but will also do more than any other one thing toward the formation of proper habits of speaking.

It may seem that all I have had to say thus far on the subject of oral composition might be summed up in the words, "Let the student talk." The function of the teacher is primarily to interest the student in talking, to assist him in a wise choice of subject, and unobtrusively to suggest devices which will enable him to overcome any "stage-fright" which besets him. Further than this his criticism should take the form of holding before the student two elemental and fundamental principles by which he may criticize his own work.

The first of these is that every speaker must make himself intelligible to his audience. Oral composition has this great advantage over written, that the student is brought more quickly to a realization of his own shortcomings. The members of his audience are also his critics: and the first demand which they make upon him is that he shall be intelligible. On the side of mere speaking this means that he must make himself heard without effort on the part of his auditors. It is only when a speaker is a man of exceptional ability or the occasion one of unique importance that an audience will listen under constant strain. We as teachers know that whatever improvement we have made in either ease or clearness of speaking has been brought about by our consciousness of the fact that students are never overattentive to our words. The best stimulus that can be given a student to improve his

speaking comes from the knowledge that what he considered to be a good speech has fallen flat because of an inaudible or ineffective delivery. To be intelligible means more than merely to be audible: it also implies expressiveness, or shading of speech to adapt itself to the meaning to be conveyed.

Universal intelligibility is an ideal toward which we should all be working in this matter of spoken English. To speak so that one may be understood by an ever-changing cosmopolitan audience necessitates a constant improvement in articulation. But more than this it involves the elimination of dialectic peculiarities, of provincialisms, of the mannerisms of the passing moment in any stratum of society. The stage more than any other medium feels this necessity laid upon it; and to appreciate the result one need only compare the beautiful English of the older actors of the London theaters with the adenoidal lisp of the stalls or the cockneyism of the gallery.

I am more and more convinced that the reason the majority of us speak so badly is that we are indifferent to the whole matter, if not a little proud of our idiosyncrasies. Certainly there is no other field in which even a slight effort at improvement meets with such an immediate reward. It might be well for all of us to take to ourselves that injunction which Henry Higgins addresses to Eliza Doolittle in the first act of Mr. Shaw's *Pygmalion*. As I am compelled to quote this from memory it is only a paraphrase: "You are a human being, with the soul of a human being. You have been endowed with the divine gift of articulation. The language of Shakespeare and of Milton is your inheritance. Stop that infernal sniffing."

The other criterion by which any speech must be judged is its power to interest the audience. In fact, it may be said that this is the only test, because people cannot be interested in that which is not intelligible to them. This is the test which is applied by the audience itself. It has been my experience that the teacher need act only as moderator or director of the criticism. A student's classmates are only too willing to criticize his efforts. Many times their comments are harsh or misdirected, but on the whole they show a keen faculty for detecting the weak points. As I have

listened to them I have often considered what a salutary effect it would have on public speaking generally, if the speaker were to have direct expressions of candid opinion from the more critical of his audience.

The chief reason why young speakers fail to interest is that they are apparently unable to select the proper points for emphasis. They give as much weight to what may be taken for granted as to the really novel information they have to impart. The obvious is stressed equally with that which piques the curiosity. Although the students may not so express themselves, their criticism may be summed up in the question, "What new facts have you given us or what new way of looking at the facts we already possess?" And this is as it should be.

I have said nothing about any of those qualities of speech which give it power to charm over and above its content. I have omitted them because I believe it is unwise in dealing with a large group of students in the limited time at our disposal to concern ourselves directly with such qualities, and also because I believe that they can be developed more effectively in an indirect way. Training in reading aloud, in our American high schools at least, seems to have been abandoned. It should be restored and emphasized from the earliest to the most advanced years as an important part of the study of English. It is invaluable as a means of developing the understanding and appreciation of literature; and there is no better way of attuning even the dullest ear to the harmonies of speech. As drama, especially poetic drama, makes the greatest demand for a highly perfected speech, we may expect much from the newly awakened interest in dramatic production in our schools as an ally in this task of improving the speech of our everyday lives.